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SUBJECT: SUPPORT FOR BASHIR "WIDE BUT THIN" SAYS MINNAWI

Classified By: CDA Alberto M. Fernandez, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Senior Assistant to the President and Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) leader Minni Minnawi told CDA Fernandez on March 28 that, based on his discussion with senior regime officials, support for President Bashir within the ruling elite is "wide but thin." Minni said that, for the moment, Bashir is unassailable, but "they are all grumbling." He noted that VP Ali Osman Taha had made it clear to him that he had nothing to do with the March 4 NGO expulsion decision. NISS Director Salah Ghosh, Darfur negotiator Ata al-Manaan, even Minister for Presidential Affairs Hassan Bakri Saleh, the President's amanuensis, have all complained in Minni's presence about the President's decision-making. "But he has the Army with him and, for the moment, they all pledge their loyalty to him to the death" (such a public pledging ceremony "baya lil-maut" - allegiance to the death - has actually taken place now for a wide range of regime officials, especially in the military and security services)

¶2. (C) Minnawi confirmed that the controversial NGO expulsion decision was taken by a small but powerful clique from SAF, NISS and Interior plus Minister of State for Humanitarian Affairs Ahmed Haroun who presented the idea directly to the President, bypassing most of the party (which is why the NCP is now so adamant to be seen as embracing a decision they were not a part of). Minni, ostensibly the senior Darfuri in the regime, laughed that he was one of many Sudanese officials who was informed of the decision, not by his own government, but by the Charge.

¶3. (C) He described a recent cabinet meeting where Ahmed Haroun minimized any possible negative consequences of the expulsions, noting that the joint UN-GOS assessment had uncovered no problems (note: the assessment uncovered real and possibly greater problems in the near future as a result of the expulsions. End note). Haroun said that the Arab and Islamic states had pledged 150 million dollars in new aid for Darfur so that the regime can weather the political affects of the expulsions and any retaliation from the West. Minnawi recalled past Arab/Islamic promises on Darfur, "they don't deliver what they promise and what they do give is pocketed by regime officials before it gets to any Darfuri." Haroun said that the INGOs were expelled because they were "making up rape stories and facilitating witnesses for the ICC."

¶4. (C) In a recent meeting of the GOS "crisis management team," NISS DG Salah Ghosh said that the GOS had been monitoring the nefarious activities of these NGOs for a long time. They would not be missed because they were not doing real work. Minni disagreed, responding that "if you knew they were doing something wrong for years, why did you wait until March 4?" He also noted that these NGOs did indeed do real work, recalling his days as a rebel in the field where "these foreign doctors would perform operations in the middle of nowhere that they don't even do in Khartoum." Minnawi's

biggest concern is the possibility of the spread of disease like cholera in overcrowded IDP camps, especially once the rainy season begins.

¶ 15. (C) Minnawi, who headed back to Darfur on March 28 to strengthen his military and political cadres in the field, described a series of frustrating meetings with VP Taha and Minister of Defense Abdurahim Hussein to try to regain SLM control over Gereida, Labado and Muhajeria in South Darfur (Minni pulled his forces out of the two first towns to fight an incursion by JEM in Muhajeria. As Minni's forces chased JEM from Muhajeria, the Sudanese Armed Forces occupied all three places without firing a shot). Both Taha and Hussein said that some sort of power-sharing was possible only if Minni incorporated his forces into SAF, a step Minni refuses knowing full well that a man without a private army in Darfur is powerless against his enemies.

¶ 16. (C) Minni told the NCP leaders that "my forces chased JEM for 25 days through Darfur and while I was doing that, you took my places." He warned them that SLM may try to take back these key sites if some sort of arrangement is not worked out (it is unclear if Minni has the power to back this claim up, SAF has been arming rival African tribes in the area, such as the Mima and Birgid, who have no love for Minnawi's predatory Zaghwah). Minni said that he looked forward to seeing new SE Gration in El Fasher and taking him to Zamzam IDP camp in North Darfur.

¶ 17. (C) Minnawi said that he (and probably other politicians) was approached by intermediaries seeking his support for President Bashir's election campaign with an eye towards an

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uncontested "election by acclamation" by Bashir. These intermediaries said that perhaps Minnawi could become a "vice-president for Darfur" under a new political system. Minni discounted the offer noting that if wanted to be bribed by the regime he would ask for things which actually mean power in Sudan: money, weapons, lancruisers, and control over towns, not an empty title. He noted that the regime had still not allowed the SLM to register formally as a political party until it gives up its fighters to the army.

¶ 18. (C) Minni described Darfur as quiet for the moment but very tense and unstable. He said that JEM, despite reinforcements in materiel, is weaker than it was before the January 2009 incursion into South Darfur, Khalil Ibrahim is having internal problems within his movement because of his autocratic behavior. Chadian President Deby is also holding onto JEM in case he needs them against any attack by the Sudan-supported Chadian rebels, "Idris will use Khalil to hunt Timane," referring to the current head of the Chadian armed opposition. Minni expects that one side or another will move into military action before the rainy season hits in earnest in June.

¶ 19. (C) Comment: Continually cheated by Khartoum and beset by his rivals in Darfur, one can only admire Minnawi's dogged determination to continue plotting, working and scheming as he seeks to remain a relevant player on both the national and Darfuri scenes. Although the Darfur Peace Agreement of 2006, brokered by the USG among others, is mostly moribund, it is the only Darfur peace accord to date and was the key to the international presence in Darfur that became UNAMID. It has been tough going for Minni nationally but he, at least, still plays a spoiler role in Darfur and tries to exert local and tribal influence. If he is not able to regain some sort of presence in South Darfur and to protect or deliver services to his hardpressed Zaghwah people in North Darfur (including in Zamzam IDP Camp and his home base in the arid "Dar Zaghwah" corner of Karnoy-Umm Barro-Muzbat), he risks total irrelevancy sooner rather than later. End comment.

FERNANDEZ